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ABSTRACT

The meaning of terminology in higher education, particularly terminology that is multinational in its use and often confusing or misunderstood, is examined. It is suggested that graduate students as well as other scholars and researchers need to define terms. A term used in a statement of a problem or in a dissertation that may be variously interpreted must be defined in the way it is to be used. If a term is unfamiliar to the reader or if there is not a standard definition, or if there are many definitions, or if a term is used in a very specific meaning, the researcher is expected to define terms. For example, writers tend to use terms (e.g., civic university) that are not widely understood outside of one cultural context. Other terms are familiar, but misunderstood across cultures (e.g., bachelor's degree). Some terms are so ethnocentric that they communicate nothing to others (e.g., accreditation). The confusion hinders communication, obstructs the translation of academic work across national systems, and makes it difficult to appropriately place foreign students in reputable institutions of higher education. It is concluded that it is possible to be precise about terminology in higher education, even when studying the subject comparatively and using concepts from a number of different national systems. Works in the field of comparative education that would be helpful to the researcher seeking to understand or define terms or concepts are identified and described. Specialized dictionaries, guides to the education systems of foreign countries or regions, classification schemes, and other sources of information are identified. (SW)

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MULTINATIONAL COMPARISON OF TERMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

This work examines the meaning of terminology in higher education, particularly that terminology which is multinational in its use and is often confusing or misunderstood. The subject is important in several ways. Writers tend to use terms, e.g., Civic University, which are not widely understood outside of one cultural context. Other terms are familiar, but misunderstood across cultures, e.g., Bachelor's Degree. Some terms are so ethnocentric that they communicate nothing to others, e.g., accreditation. The confusion hinders communication, obstructs the translation of academic work across national systems, and makes it difficult to appropriately place foreign students in reputable institutions of higher education. This research will examine the problem, review the literature, and suggest some approaches which may alleviate the problem.

The interest in this topic came from a number of sources. First, there has been a long-standing problem of definition of terms in higher education, as required in theses and dissertations. Graduate students often do not know where to obtain accurate, current citations to support definitions of words they need to use. For a lack of anything better, they turn to a general dictionary, which is often inadequate for this purpose, or to Carter Good's dictionary of educational terms, is now old (1973 is the most recent revision), is oriented to elementary and secondary education and not higher education, and often lacks precision. There are other sources, as we shall see later, but they are often specialized or hard to find.

Second, the increasing number of foreign students in North American universities adds another dimension to the problem (Tonkin, 1981). Not only do they depend more on definitions than do students whose first language is English, but they bring English terminology with them which is sometimes more confusing than clarifying to faculty and fellow students in the U.S.

The enrollment of foreign students in the U.S. has been growing as has the percentages. From 34,200 in 1954-55 to the 1981-82 fugure of 311,880. During the same period the percentage rose from 1.4% to 2.6% of total enrollment in U.S. institutions of higher education. About a third of these are in graduate training (Boyan, 1981). These statistics indicate a possible trend, and they are evidence of the growing multicultural nature of higher education in the United States.

Third, for anyone working in comparative higher education, with many terms used across national and linguistic boundaries, some classification system appears to be necessary to the development of a common understanding of terms. One purpose of this paper is to help the researcher to examine some classification systems.

Definition of Terms. To a careful research study definitions are an essential and integral part. One cannot tell what was found if there is no common agreement as to what was researched.

There are a number of reasons for defining one's terms in doing research, and, without being exhaustive, some important ones are described below.

First, in order to define words which may be unfamiliar to the reader; perhaps these are professional terms which would be understood by colleagues, such as "affect", but which seem to others to be jargon. If a study needs to use such words because of the meaning and precision they contain, words should be defined by using a standard reference for the professional field. Such a standard reference may be hard to find in the field of higher education, particularly with respect to multinational terms.

Second, one may wish to define words that are being used in a precise sense in the research. If one uses the word "college", for example, it has to be defined, not because everyone does not know what it means, but precisely because everyone (figuratively speaking) does know what the word means, but often disagrees on the meaning. A number of persons reading the research will have questions about the meaning of the word. A fairly common word, sometimes used by a professional in a specific and precise way, is a prime candidate for definition.

Third, the proposed research may depend upon an operational definition of a term. Two common terms in higher education research are, "educational quality" and "student achievement". Neither one of these concepts means very much to the educational researcher unless the research defines operationally what is meant. For example, "students achievement" may mean the level of test scores from x test, y form, given at z time. "Educational quality" may be defined operationally by a number of variables, such as expenditure per student, educational level of faculty, years of teaching experience, and selectivity of the institution of higher education. Thus, an operational definition is one that specifies the operations that will define the word. Operational definitions not only allow the researcher to say precisely what is meant by terms used in the research, but these definitions also establish a basis for objective tests of the outcomes of the proposed study.

It is not possible to reach objective conclusions in a study about educational quality or student achievement without defining what is meant by these terms. They are value laden concepts, and different groups and individuals have very different ideas of what is meant by each concept.

In sum, graduate students as well as other scholars and researchers need to define terms. Terms used in a statement of a problem or in a dissertation that may be variously interpreted must be defined in the way it is to be used. If a term is unfamiliar to the reader or if there is no standard definition, or if there are many definitions, or if a term is used in a very specific meaning, the researcher is expected to define terms.

It may be helpful to define some of the terms used in this paper in order to foster communication. This paper will use three terms interchangeably: higher education, post-secondary education, and tertiary education. Some writers make a distinction, but it seems thin. These terms are used in one part of the world or other, and they often, when stripped of nuances, seem to mean the same thing - namely, education after secondary school which is offered by institutions authorized by government or recognized by accrediting agencies to grant diplomas or degrees. Usually such education requires, for admission, a secondary school certificate of completion or diploma.

Classification is used here to mean an ordering or arrangement of terms into groups, sets, clusters, aggregations on the basis of some relationship, one to another, perceived, explained, and defended as logical by the classifier. Thus institutions of higher education may be classified by level, size, social class of students, cost, religious, governmental or private nature, prestige, selectivity, size of budget or student body, and so forth. Usually the classification system is developed for some research or communication purpose, and it is usually made more difficult by giving it a multinational aspect.

An example of multinational terminology which is confusing, though not apparently so at first glance, is for instance, the term Bachillerato, which looks like a cognate of our Bachelor's degree. The problem is that the former is a secondary diploma, with certain special connotations, and the latter, an undergraduate college degree. Unfortunately it is not even that simple. In some Latin American countries, such as Peru, the Bachillerato is the name of the first university degree. As another example, the word "professional education" as used here has quite a different meaning from its cognate in Latin America.

Some scholars overseas assert that in general the term "thesis" is used to describe the final written document of a doctorate program, while "dissertation" is the term for the final paper of a lesser degree (UNESCO, 1976). The United States usage seems to be precisely the opposite.

A teacher training college may be, depending on the context, entirely encompassed within secondary education, straddle secondary and higher education, or comprise specialized training for four or five years at the postsecondary level, often at a university. High school, grammar school, lycée, Gymnasium and liceo are all terms which, at one level of generality, describe the same thing, but at another level are quire different. Without defining our terms, how do we communicate our findings across national and linguistic lines?

There are works in the field of comparative higher education which would be very helpful to the researcher wishing to understand or define terms or concepts. Definitions, while not the purpose of such works, often come out in the context, or are explicitly stated in the body of the work because the author has the same need, in this case, as the reader - to define terms in order to use them precisely. Some examples of this would be Philip Altbach's Comparative Higher Education, and Van de Graaff's Academic Power. One can, for example use Van de Graaff to define and understand the concepts of university-type and non-university-type higher education, and the difficulty of dealing with these terms in a multi-

national study. The work is filled with concepts which are defined to help the researcher in understanding and using terms in higher education: academic power, professional authority, administrative centralism, politicization, and a great number of foreign terms relating to the national systems of higher education researched in the Vande Graaff work. It is an altogether excellent work for the purpose of trying to understand and define concepts across national systems of higher education.

Some other examples of works in comparative higher education would be Peisins, 1972 and Niblett and Butts- 1972. One can use Niblett for an understanding and definition, within an international context, of such terms as "specialization", "general education", "mass higher education", "comprehensive university model", "binary model", "higher learning", "democratization of higher education", and "polytecnic."

There are also works which are like specialized dictionaries in some way. Some define terms generally in the field of education, but have a multinational flavor, and others are specific to higher education in one national context.

A very useful work is Key Words in Education, a British publication. It helps us understand a number of commonly used terms, such as "further education," "binary system of education," "university grants committee," "university college," but it gives, naturally, British definitions which are often of limited use here. It also suffers, from the view of higher education, from lack of specificity. Most of the terms are too far wide of the mark; "Bed-wetting" comes after "BEd" for example. The focus is not on higher education, clearly.

One of the most useful standard works for this purpose is the International Encyclopedia of Higher Education (Knowles, 1977). Many terms in higher education used throughout the world are defined and explained either in the glossary or in the articles. It is an excellent guide to terms but it is now getting old. Despite

its recent publication date, one sometimes has the impression that articles were written years before 1977. Just a few examples of terms or concepts well defined are, "tertiary education," "third level education," "baccalaureat," and "lycée."

Words for the Wise (Beach. 1979) is useful, particularly for foreign students in the U.S., but it is a bit less than scholarly in its approach. Still, it is clear with respect to terminology, particularly Americanisms, in higher education, and it is sometimes amusing.

There are works from overseas which are definitive in terms of specifics about the higher education system of a specific nation. One such work is the one put out by the National Council of Universities in Venezuela (CNU, 1980). This particular work for example lists every post-secondary institution in the country, programs of preparation, length of program preparation, and classification of institutions. If one reads the language, it is possible from such documentation to define within the context of that country, institutions, areas and program of study, duration of study, types of higher education institutions, and to describe rather precisely the nature of the occupations or professions for which tertiary preparation is offered. Such works exist for every country, as far as can be determined, but in some cases they are hard to find and they usually require a knowledge of national, official language to read them.

Another useful work with some definitions and descriptions is Higher Education in the United Kingdom (British Council, 1980). It is particularly good for anyone working in the field of British higher education.

Among the most useful works for this purpose are those published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). One is cited in this paper but there are similar works on most of the countries of the world which send large numbers of students to the United States.

The specific work cited here, (Hoover, 1978) on Venezuela, is a very informative guide on the educational system of the country, with an emphasis on a

comparison of systems for the purpose of academic placement of students in U.S. institutions of higher education. This work thoroughly describes the Venezuelan institutions of higher education, their degrees and programs of study, levels of study, grading and examination systems, and in so doing essentially defines and describes a number of terms useful to scholars in the field. These terms are described often in ways that are not only comparative with respect to the U.S. and Venezuela, but also which contribute to an understanding of terminology used throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and indeed the Latin world. Some examples are terms like bachiller, colegio universitario, profesional, educación normal, diploma, licenciado, universidades, politécnicos, pedagógicos, and so on. There is, in addition to the text which contains many explanations and definitions, a glossary at the end with a large number of short definitions which would be useful to a non-Spanish speaking scholar working in the field of comparative higher education. There are a few terms relating to general education, but most of these are necessary to fully understand the nature and variety of preparation programs leading to higher education.

Regional political bodies often publish information about higher education in a specific region. These publications may be useful for definitional purposes because often the region is multi-linguistic as well as multinational. Also, because information and statistics are published about the region, crossing lines of national sovereignty, a way to compare the relevant systems of higher education, and to describe them in appropriate terminology has to be found. Thus the publications of these regional bodies are useful to the scholar in the field of comparative or international higher education. One example is the periodic Statistical Bulletin of the OAS which happens to be published in English and Spanish, although other OAS publications may be available also in Portugese or French.

Another example would be the many works of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The Educational Statistics Yearbook and Development

of Higher Education, 1950-1967, are both helpful in classifying and defining aspects of higher education in Europe. Other helpful guides from regional bodies might include, for example, the Bulletin of the International Association of Universities, published in Paris, and the News-Letter of the Council of Europe, Documentation Centre for Education in Europe, published periodically at the Centre's office in Strasbourg. Another suggestion would be the educational statistics coming from the office of the European Community (EUROSTAT), in Brussels.

The statistical reports of national governments, besides being generally informative, also generally provide help with definitions. Sometimes this help comes from the context of the use of a word, or the statistical information helps define a word, but more often there are definitions to be found in three places; the introduction, footnotes to tables, and if there is a copy of the questionnaire included in the work, it often contains definitions which are essential to the accurate responses solicited. All three of the NCES documents cited in the list of references would be useful in this regard, as well as the example from Venezuela (CNU, 1980). The Education Directory for example defines a long list of administrative officers in U.S. colleges and universities, including a description of their functions. Questionnaires are reproduced with definitions (U.S.) of, for example "multi-campus institution," "first professional degree," "professional program," and "college-level." Accreditation is defined and described, with a complete listing (as of date of publication) of accrediting agencies as listed by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. One could go on, but the point is that for certain types of precise definitions in higher education, these statistical directories are excellent. In fact, if the researcher is to use the statistical data it would seem necessary to use the definitions of terms described in a statistical way by the tables.

UNESCO, looking at higher education systems world-wide, has developed, in order to define and compare terms and concepts internationally, a number of

classification systems, specifically the international standard classification of education (ISCED). One useful aspect of the system is the ability to compare levels of higher education institutions between nations by using such defined terms as, "education at the third level, second stage." This, and the other terms used in the classification system, are so defined that almost every formal education in educational institutions can be allocated to the correct class and compared along relative dimensions with others of the same class throughout the world. Some other works which classify are cited also in the Reference Notes, i.e. OECD, 1970, and the NCES documents.

In terms of definitional needs, the UNESCO document (ISCED, 1974) also provides descriptions of a great number of programs which one would find in tertiary education throughout the world. These descriptions include the level and area of the program (programs at the third level, first stage, in education science and teacher training), purpose of the program, usual teaching methods and curriculum, professional qualifications at completion, educational prerequisites, length of program, required practicums, and the usual degree, certificate, or diploma which one may expect to earn.

There are, of course, the works on a specific subject area which should be consulted for an expert view of the content, parameters, and definitions of terms in the subject. Just two examples are cited here, both in the subject of curriculum in higher education, Levine, 1979 and Carnegie, 1979. Both would be valuable works to consult for the definition of terms in higher education curriculum, terms which will not be satisfactorily found in more standard dictionaries; for example the terms, "curriculum," "competency-based education," "Carnegie unit," "major," "elective," or "external degree programs." These works also employ a number of foreign terms and concepts useful to the scholar in higher education curriculum. The generality here, of course, is that the most precise, useful, and well thought out definitions of terms are often to be found in works in the area of specialization.

Finally, for brief descriptions of national systems of higher education, with some appropriate terminology and implicit definitions, two works stand out: The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education, and the World Guide to Higher Education. Each is brief, somewhat dated, and not intended for an indepth study of a national system, but each has very helpful and interesting chapters and introductions on methodology and classification systems.

In summary, it is possible to be precise about terminology in higher education, even when studying the subject comparatively and using concepts from a number of different national systems. However, it is unlikely that one will easily find terms defined in one place. This paper suggests some of the possible sources for definitions, and provides examples of sources from which generalities may be drawn.

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